

Message Text

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ACTION SS-25

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P R 020605Z JUN 78
FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3416
INFO AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY JIDDA

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 TEL AVIV 6998

EXDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PGOV, PINT, IS, US
SUBJECT: BEGIN'S HEALTH

1. SUMMARY AND COMMENT: THIS WEEK'S "HAOLAM HAZEH" CONTAINS A LONG ARTICLE ENTITLED "WHAT IS HAPPENING TO MENAHEM BEGIN?" THIS LEFTIST WEEKLY MAGAZINE IS SENSATIONALIST IN APPROACH BUT ON MORE THAN ONE OCCASION HAS SCOOPED THE REST OF THE PRESS. THIS PARTICULAR PIECE, (EXCERPTS FOLLOW) ASSERTS THAT BEGIN'S HEALTH IS BAD, THAT HE PERIODICALLY LOSES HIS LUCIDITY, THAT HE IS SUBJECT TO TEMPORARY BLACKOUTS, AND THAT HE IS SCARCELY AWARE OF MOST OF WHAT IS HAPPENING IN THE ISRAELI GOVERNMENT. WE QUOTE THIS ARTICLE AT LENGTH BECAUSE IT IS CONSISTENT, THOUGH NO DOUBT OVERDRAWN, WITH OUR OWN PERCEPTIONS OF BEGIN'S PHYSICAL CONDITION. THE BREAKUP OF THE JANUARY POLITICAL COMMITTEE MEETING IN JERUSALEM SEEMS TO HAVE SIGNALLED THE BEGINNING OF THIS DETERIORATION AND POLITICAL CIRCLES HERE ARE BUZZING WITH RUMORS THAT BEGIN IS INCREASINGLY FOGGY AND DEPRESSED. WHILE THESE RUMBLINGS CAN BE PARTIALLY CREDITED TO PURE SPECUALTION ABOUT

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A MAN WHO HAS A HISTORY OF HEART TROUBLE, OR SIMPLE WISHFUL THINKING BY A VIRULENTLY ANTI-BEGIN PUBLICATION, WE SHARE THE PIECE'S JUDGEMENT THAT BEGIN IS CLEARLY NOW IN A PHYSICAL TROUGH. HE IS SHOWING SOME OF THE SIGNS OF SOMEONE WHO IS LOSING HIS GRIP. BUT BEGIN IN THE PAST HAS REVEALED GREAT RESERVOIRS OF RESILIENCY AFTER BOUTS OF SICKNESS. HE MAY WELL DO SO AGAIN.

2. BEGIN TEXT: MENAHEM BEGIN STOLE THE SHOW FROM YITZHAK NAVON. ON THE DAY THE LATTER WAS SWORN IN AS PRESIDENT OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL, THE EYES OF HUNDEREDS OF THOUSANDS OF SPECTATORS WATCHING THE CEREMONY ON THEIR TV SCREENS WERE FOCUSED FAR MORE INTENTLY ON THE PRIME MINISTER'S FACE THAN ON THAT OF ISRAEL'S NEW PRESIDENT.

ONLY ONE DAY EARLIER IT WAS ANNOUNCED THAT MENACHEM BEGIN HAD AGAIN FALLEN ILL. THE OFFICIAL STATEMENTS OF THE CABINET SPOKESMAN SAID THAT HE HAD CAUGHT A CHILL, AND HAD A TEMPERATURE. THEREFORE HIS DOCTORS HAD ORDERED HIM TO REMAIN AT HOME FOR A FEW DAYS, THEY SAID. HOWEVER, NO AUTHORIZED MEDICAL BULLETIN WAS PUBLISHED BY HIS DOCTORS ON MENAHEM BEGIN'S STATE OF HEALTH. THIS FACT, PLUS THE EFFORTS MADE BY THE CABONET SECRETARY TO DISPEL ANY DOUBTS WITH THE CLAIM THAT "A TEMPERATURE IS NOT BEING ILL," GAVE RISE TO A WAVE OF RUMORS AND WHISPERINGS...

THE TRUT IS THAT THE STATEMENT ON BEGIN'S CHILL, TO WHICH HIS RAISED TEMPERATURE WAS ALSO ATTRIBUTED, WAS NOT MEANT TO COVER UP FOR ANOTHER ILLNESS, AS HAD BEEN THE CASE IN APRIL 1977, DURING THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN. BEGIN WAS APPARENTLY THE VICTIM OF A LIGHT ATTACK OF FLU, WHICH IS AT PRESENT GOING THE ROUNDS IN ISRAEL AND HAS AFFECTED QUITE A FEW PEOPLE. SYMPTOMS ARE HEADACHE, PRESSURE ON THE CONFIDENTIAL

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EYEBALLS, GENERAL CHILL AND "SHIVERY" FEELING AND A HIGH TEMPERATURE.

THESE WERE DIAGNOSED IN BEGIN, AND HE HAD A TEMPERATURE OF 40 DEGREES. THE FLU ITSELF IS NOT DANGEROUS, REQUIREING A FEW DAYS OF BED-REST. THAT, AT LEAST IS THE CASE WHERE ORDINARY PEOPLE ARE CONCERNED. NOT SO WITH MENACHEM BEGIN. IN A MAN IN HIS CONDITION, HAVING RECOVERED FROM A HEART ATTACK ONLY 14 MONTHS AGO, AND HAVING BEEN HOSPITALIZED ANEW A YEAR AGO FOLLOWING AN INFLAMMATION OF THE OUTER MEMBRANE OF THE HEART, EVEN A RELATIVELY MILD ILLNESS SUCH AS A COLD OR FLU, COULD CAUSE SERIOUS COMPLICATIONS. THE DOCTORS' MAIN WORRY WAS THAT THE FEVER AND ACCOMPANYING SYMPTOMS OF THE CHILL MIGH CAUSE A RETURN OF THE INFLAMMATION, OR PNEUMONIA.

IN DIFFERENT CIRCUMSTANCES EVEN THIS MILD CHILL MIGHT PERHAPS HAVE OBLIGED BEGIN, IN HIS CONDITIONS TO GO INTO HOSPITAL AND PUT HIMSELF UNDER CONSTANT MEDICAL SURVEILLANCE. BUT THIS WAS NOT DONE, MAINLY TO CREATE A MISLEADING IMPRESSION REGARDING THE REAL SEVERITY OF THE ILLNESS...

EVEN AFTER SOME IMPROVEMENT IN THE PRIME MINISTER'S CHILL OCCURRED, AND HIS TEMPERATURE DROPPED, THE DOCTORS STILL ASKED HIM TO REMAIN IN BED, ALTHOUGH RUN-OF-THE-MILL PATIENTS ARE GENERALLY ALLOWED OUT OF BED IN SIMILAR CONDITION. THE DECISION AS TO WHETHER TO LET SUCH A PATIENT GET UP OR MAKE HIM STAY IN BED DEPENDS ON THE GENERAL PHYSICAL CONDITION OF THE PATIENT INVOLVED. AND IN MENAHEM BEGIN'S CASE, THE PATIENT'S GENERAL CONDITION WAS GRAVE INDEED.

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3. IT IS THIS FACT, AND NOT THE FACT THAT THE PRIME MINISTER HAD CAUGHT A CHILL, THAT PEOPLE WERE NOW ENDEAVORING TO CONCEAL FROM THE PUBLIC. CLOSE ASSOCIATES OF MENAHEM BEGIN AND CABINET MINISTERS HAVE BEEN AWARE OF THE SITUATION FOR SOME WEEKS NOW, AND THE FACT IS THAT THE PRIME MINISTER'S PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL CONDITION HAS OF LATE BEEN EXTREMELY LOW. HE IS EXHAUSTED, WEAK, DRAINED AND INCAPABLE OF FUNCTIONING PROPERLY.

THIS STATE OF AFFAIRS IS ALTOGETHER DIFFERENT FROM HIS GENERAL CONDITION IMMEDIATELY AFTER HIS RECOVERY FROM THE INFLAMMATION OF THE CARDIAC MEMBRANE A YEAR AGO. THEN, FOR ABOUT NINE MONTHS, HE ASTONISHED EVEN HIS OWN DOCTORS, SHOWING HIMSELF TO BE FULL OF ENERGY, ABLE TO STAND UP TO THE PRESSURES AND BURDEN OF WORK TO AN EXTENT THAT YOUNGER AND HEALTHIER MEN WOULD HAVE ENVIED. TODAY, AS THOSE CLOSE TO HIM ADMIT, "THINGS ARE NOT WHAT THEY WERE; THIS IS NO LONGER THE SAME BEGIN." ONLY A FEW

MONTHS AGO BEGIN WAS CONSIDERED SOMETHING OF A MEDICAL MARVEL.
IN HIS ROOM IN THE ICHILOV HOSPITAL'S INTENSIVE CARE UNIT,
WHERE HE WAS HOSPITALIZED FOR HIS HEART ATTACK AND AGAIN
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DURING THE INFLAMMATORY ILLNESS, THE DOCTORS JOKINGLY SAID
THAT BEGIN HAD HELPED THEM DISCOVER A NEW MEDICAL METHOD OF
TREATING CARDIAC CASES. "WHAT WE HAVE TO DO IS FIX UP A ROOM
HERE, MAKE IT LOOK LIKE THE PRIME MINISTER'S BUREAU; EVERY
SERIOUS CARDIAC CASE BROUGHT IN WILL BE PUT INTO THIS ROOM-
AND WILL RECOVER IMMEDIATELY."

THEY NO LONGER MAKE THESE JOKES. EVEN THE PRIME MINISTER'S
REAL BUREAU IS NOT HELPIN HIM TO OVERCOME HIS CONDITION.

WHAT IS HAPPENING TO BEGIN AND THE CAUSE OF ANXIETY TO
THE CABINET AND TO THOSE CLOSE TO HIM IS A SITUATION WHICH
KEEPS RECURRING. THERE ARE HOURS AT A STRETCH WHEN HE IS
LUCID AND ACTIVE. AND THEN, SUDDENLY, HE LOSES HIS LUCIDITY.
AND THINGS BEGIN TO BLUR. HE UTTERS TWO SENTENCES AND STOPS.
HIS WALK BECOMES UNSTEADY; AND, ESPECIALLY, AT THOSE TIMES,
WHICH OF LATE HAVE BEEN RECURRING WITH INCREASING FREQUENCY,
HE IS CAPABLE OF TALKING TO PEOPLE IN A WAY WHICH LEAVES
THEM WITH THE FEELING THAT HE DOES NOT REALIZE WHAT IS BEING
SAID TO HIM, THAT HE CANNOT TAKE IN WHAT THEY ARE SAYING.

THOSE WHO TALK TO THE PRIME MINISTER GENERALLY AND
REGULARLY HAVE THE FEELING THAT HE IS SUBJECT TO FITS OF
TEMPORARY BLACK-OUTS, AT WHICH TIME HE IS TOTALLY CUT OFF
FROM REALITY. HE APPEARS TO BE IN A DIFFERENT WORLD ALTO-
GETHER AND TAKES NO INTEREST IN WHAT IS HAPPENING AROUND HIM.
THIS KIND OF SITUATION IS AS A RULE CAUSED BY SLIGHT AND
RAPID DISTURBANCES IN THE BLOOD SUPPLY TO THE BRAIN. IT
COULD BE CAUSED BY PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS, SUCH AS DAMAGE
TO BLOOD VESSELS RESULTING FROM MYOCARDIAL INFARCTION. IT
COULD, HOWEVER, ALSO RESULT FROM PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS.

SINCE IT IS NOT POSSIBLE TO ELICIT ACCURATE AND DETAILED
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INFORMATION FROM BEGIN'S PHYSICIANS AS TO THE PRECISE FAC-
TORS LEADING TO HIS PERIODIC LOSSES OF CLARITY, OF THINGS
BECOMING BLURRED, OF HIS BEING CUT OFF FROM REALITY, WE
CAN ONLY MAKE ASSUMPTIONS AS TO WHAT COULD CAUSE HIM ALL
THIS.

IT COULD BY PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS. ONE INDICATION OF THIS ASSUMPTION IS THAT THE SUDDEN CHANGE IN BEGIN'S CONDITION DID NOT COME AFTER ANY DRASTIC ALTERATION OF HIS STATE OF HEALTH, BUT AFTER THE FAILURE OF THE PEACE NEGOTIATIONS WITH EGYPT, AND MORE ESPECIALLY AFTER BEGIN'S DIFFICULT MEETING WITH PRESIDENT CARTER IN MARCH. SINCE THEN BEGIN APPEARS TO BE OBSESSED BY ONE THING ALONE: THE POLITICAL ISSUE, WHICH IS MADE UP OF RELATIONS WITH THE US AND THE CONTINUATION OF NEGOTIATIONS WITH EGYPT. NOTHING ELSE INTERESTS HIM. VARIOUS OTHER MATTERS FALLING UNDER HIS RESPONSIBILITY AS PRIME MINISTER RECEIVE NO ATTENTION FROM HIM. OTHER ISSUES WITH WHICH HE WAS SUPPOSED TO DEAL AND ON WHICH HE WAS TO MAKE DECISIONS ARE COMPLETELY IGNORED BY HIM.

THIS, PERHAPS, IS THE REASON WHY THE ONLY MINISTER WITH WHOM BEGIN MEETS FREQUENTLY FOR TALKS AND DISCUSSIONS, IS FOREIGN MINISTER MOSHE DAYAN. OTHER CABINET MINISTERS, WHO MORE THAN ONCE NEED TO CONSULT WITH BEGIN ON AFFAIRS PERTAINING TO THEIR RESPECTIVE MINISTRIES, HAVE THE FEELING THAT BEGIN IS SCARCELY AWARE OF THEIR EXISTENCE.

IN SUCH A SITUATION, INCAPABLE OF FUNCTIONING AS HE SHOULD, ESPECIALLY AS PRIME MINISTER, MENAHEM BEGIN GIVES RISE TO CONCERN AND ANXIETY IN THE HEARTS OF ALL THOSE AWARE OF HIS REAL CONDITION, AND FEARFUL OF THE GRAVE IMPLICATIONS THIS MIGHT HAVE ON THE CONDITION OF THE COUNTRY AS A WHOLE. END TEXT
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